

Hermeneutics of Bequeathing
Concern for the Future

Ratnakar Tripathy

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RATNAKAR TRIPATHY

Do not ask us for the formula to open worlds,
Some twisted syllables, yes, one dead-dry as a branch
Nowadays we can only tell you this,
What we are not, what we do not want.

— Eugenio Montale
Bones of the Cuttlefish

(1) ADDRESSING THE PROGENY

In this state of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, 'suppose all your projects in life were realised; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant; would this be great joy and happiness to you?'. And an irrepressible self consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down.

—John Stuart Mill
Autobiography

The above lines from Mill's autobiography will be taken generally either as an instance of existential/existentialist crisis or perhaps a difficult psychological state, both of which are now important myths of the modern western or in fact any modern industrial society. I do not however wish to dwell on the dark smog of despair depicted so starkly in the passage. Instead I wish to point out that this passage indicates a serious questioning of what had been 'gifted' to Mill as the philosophy of utilitarianism. The seriousness of the questioning is clear in that the very foundations of not simply a specific philosophical school but of the very prime values of life such as happiness and practical effort seem bracketed and frozen.

The context of this questioning is no less significant. For one thing it relates to the hopes, fears, the intellectual stamina and feelings that John Stuart Mill inherited from the senior Mill. Again since Mill's autobiography addresses his readers, there is involved in it a process of passing on, of further transmission of a complex message. I feel that there is a particular kind of transmission that may be called 'bequeathing' which is a distinct moment in the midst of the great rush of messages and things that we give and receive in life.

I intend to focus on the hermeneutic of bequeathing in order to make it stand out in an age when the sacral and the traditional, biological, legal notions of inheritance no longer seem adequate. It is as if a certain mode of hermeneutic has become too feeble to support our individual, communal or institutional im-

agination or rather that we are hesitant in taking recourse to it. This makes it necessary that we recharge the given hermeneutic resources in order to make them adequate for a civilized life. In plain though parodied language, although it is true that in our age we are as worried about our children as any other, we must navigate through these worries with the help of a new philosophical compass rather than pretend that nothing has changed and that we are still on familiar grounds.

I took the passage from Mill, as while attempting to bequeath his compact life-story to the future generations he also constantly reflects on his own manner of accepting James Mill's heritage. Given all this, Mill's attempt to transmit his autobiography, rather stirringly and lucidly, seemed to me like an attempt to bequeath. I am of course aware that to someone else Mill's autobiography might seem a particularly barren one and I shall leave all such quarrels out of this brief essay.

While claiming that Mill's brief confessional is an attempt at bequeathing, I am also aware that there could be so many ways of doing it. There could also be so many ways of expressing concern with the human future. I have in mind the very downright matter of the variety of laws that concern the inheritance of property, the running of the various public institutions, the changes and discontinuities effected through meliorism and the equally downright sensuous satisfaction on the other hand that according to Winnicott, a mother is supposed to receive through the feeding of her child. Many of these concerns go unquestioned, as even questioning them would seem to amount to raising and-perhaps nourishing a nihilistic monster. Especially in a briskly pragmatic context where policy matters are quickly examined as if by a dentist in a hurry the purpose is to generally remove the bad tooth and take leave of the patient. One cannot, for example, stop work on a dam half-way and propose a discussion on the reservoir of life-meanings, as in order to do that one has to have technical, scientific excuses and justifications. This is understandable. Sunderlal Bahuguna can, as if, lump it, if he does not like it!

But the reason I found it appropriate to bring in John Stuart Mill rather than a Sufi mystic was only to emphasize one simple point – that after all the quarrels between religion and science get settled or refuse to settle, there is one area where they can happily meet – that is, not simply for a hostile dialogue or noisy pretensions at it, but to share a the common ground – namely a concern for the human future – which in its most banal forms retains some measure of authentic feeling and wisdom, quite simply for its basic disinterestedness. Do we not generally discuss the human future presuming our absence from it or do we at all? Do our future projections carry the same vanities that we cannot ever escape within our lives? Although these questions seem to border on the religious, if a secularist refuses to ask them he is surely being perverse.

The fact is that our conceptual grammar is overloaded with the future tense. It is easy in a fashionable way to accuse our religious-minded ancestors of not having the common sense of staying away from the reveries of an after-life, but

all our important concepts – development, progress, growth, point maniacally towards the future if not after-future. Unlike our ancestors who balanced the shooting arrow of time with the comfort of its historical cyclicity, our futures seem to come impatiently headlong. In fact, one of the reasons why communist ideologies of late have become redundant is that everyone is now a meliorist and every ideology, obviously, aims only at human betterment. With the mirage of perfectionism being removed, we seem to be doubly insured against disasters.

But this false sense of security can again be stormed at through a few lines from John Stuart Mill:

Analytic habits may thus even strengthen the associations between causes and effects, means and ends, but tend together to weaken those, which are, to speak familiarly, a mere matter of feeling. They are therefore (I thought) favourable to prudence and clear-sightedness, but a perpetual worm at the root both of passions and of the virtues; and above all, fearfully undermine all desires and all pleasures....

Coming from Mill it is easier not to suspect the passage either of anti-intellectualism or irrationalism. But remarkably, Mill seems to relegate the purely cerebral and the purely operational almost into something like the Freudian, mythical demonland of the death-instinct. This passage also makes us wonder in Mill's fashion, if a philosophy of happiness is mostly philosophy and very little happiness, and an epicurean attitude amounts to a partial amnesia for things and events ugly or hateful.

What I mainly wish to point out however is that it is these passages which strengthen my feeling of having inherited something substantial from Mill, even if I do borrow many of his other ideas with lesser digestion and insight. This feeling of course cannot be arbitrary and there must be an explanation for it.

The explanation probably lies in the fact that there is a serious difference between accepting an inheritance as a gift and being burdened with the questionable gratefulness of inescapable inheritance. When a believer passes on the God-given institutions and ideas to the next generation he firmly believes that God wishes him to further the progeny as well as the divinely ordained wealth in its material and non-material aspects. Secular humanism similarly regards humanity as an inherently enduring value and sees virtue in its continued prosperity. While both seem to align themselves together in near agreement, one begins to wonder about two major philosophical issues that immediately follow – first, that of the hermeneutic of future concern and, second, the hermeneutic of its inherent value.

The hermeneutic of future concern would seem to be almost a para-ideological current, a vein that moves across various value-boundaries and would in fact seem to connect them in ways that allow various extents of dialogue. This is probably the reason that inspite of the genocidal margins of various shades of the Social Darwinist ideologies, we are lucky in not having developed any full-scale philosophy of murder or doom which some of the religions developed and

maintained as sacral stand-byes. On a less gross level, this is perhaps the reason too that Rocquentin, the nauseated character in Sartre's novel was notably a historical researcher, who carried objective detachment with his topic of research to extremes of destructive boredom, rather than a development experts or a social worker in Bangla Desh, or Ethiopia, which would have made *Nausea* a very awkward novel rather than the masterpiece it is.

As regards the second issue, that of the hermeneutic of the inherency that seems to be common to both religion and secularism, one begins to suspect that the most thorough-going secularization never quite gets down to daring to entirely desacralize the human future. Although we like to imagine that our five year plans link us solidly with the future, the fact is that the other end of the bridge dangles over the sacred abyss of the unknown. We like to put together data and figures to bolster it up but the traffic signals looming over the horizon are more like utopic beacons than anything else. Philosophers like Isaiah Berlin keep reminding us that the best of the human values do not fit together well, but we do go on dreaming of making neat arrangements despite concurring with him in his basically anti-utopic assertion. Our hope is probably derived from the converse of Berlin's argument, namely, that the many forms of human evil do not necessarily nourish or support each other either! (Not all smugglers become politicians nor do all the politicians smuggle – a trivial example).

Whatever the case, the difficulty with the desacralization of the future perhaps lies in the simple fact that although it is relatively simple to leave God's domain, and enter the free pasture of human efficacy either as a tall, muscular humanist, or the Fuehrer himself, it is difficult to walk out of the future and feel satisfied with life, bound between the cradle and the crematorium. The science of archaeology has habituated us to an anti-mythic nostalgia where we wait for the potsherds to be dug up in order to be reminded of the past, but the perpetual sadness of the realization that the present is a near fiction keeps driving us towards concern for the future till it builds into a virtual religious frenzy.

There may be nothing seriously wrong in a civilization living for tomorrow. It may be demonstrated after some effort that it is probably merely another definition of civilization or attempts at it. I do nevertheless see a serious fracture at the heart of the hermeneutic of our future concern which for the time being I can best label as scientific triumphism. I posit the other extreme in religious surrender since I see surrender as more characteristic of religion. But the two traits are by no means intended to sound as static distinctions between science and religion especially if one no longer sees them as polarities. Although it is difficult to visualize a serious form of scientific, secular, humanist gloom, our worryings over global environmental predicament do begin to acquire a doom like melancholy. On the other hand as an amateur anthropologist I have had the experience of a village *shaman* (*ojha*) offering to make me his disciple and sharing with me the services of an obedient 'ghost' who in the manner of Alladin's genie could carry out miracles but could also perform the mundane services of a mere butler – polishing shoes or getting cigarettes from the market.

The element of *siddhi* which the *shaman* spoke of seemed like an instance of religious triumphism to me. To be fair to him, he did warn me of the dangers involved, in that an idle ghost may at times turn against the master and hack him to death, as *siddhi* can suddenly fail like the unchecked brakes of a car or a bike as the *shaman* put it to me. At any rate, when man claims theoretic omnipotence for his gods who do not always perform, one can see in it too the vicarious, infantile human urge.

The hermeneutic of triumphism seems to be characterized by an element of arrogance in that it entirely involves the 'building' of a future with little awareness that our absence from it is also entailed, and that it is for the future generations to inherit it as something relatively plastic or mouldable in nature. In brief, when we reify the future into a hydel project, a dam or an arms test site, it is only a consequence of the triumphist hermeneutic which in its extreme form makes the future seem like an engineering project, auralized by the sacral feeling of a solemn civilizational task. I have in mind the sacred moment of the inauguration of a project when a ribbon is cut and a space-craft takes off in the sky. It is a moment which drenches our consciences with the satisfaction that the future of humanity is now well taken care of.

In order to make my point clearer I will again go back to the passages from John Stuart Mill and my responses to it.

Perhaps the reason behind a strong feeling on my part that Mill wished to bequeath something to a future reader is merely that I noticed in him a remarkable absence of what I call triumphism. His autobiography has a strong developmental bias in that it is a history of personal growth. It also has a pedagogical hinge to it as it keeps referring to how he learnt, how much he learnt from life, and how he tried to impart his learning to others. If he seems relatively free of the sentiment of religious surrender, of giving in to what the future may have in store, he comes out equally unguilty of depicting his life as a case of sheer march of progress with the 'side effects' nonchalantly taken for granted.

All these interpretive niceties are terribly important only to someone who wishes to inherit – to someone who does not wish to be burdened with bridges laid over dry land but gratefully accepts the building material which he can employ on his own chosen sites. He is a colonizer who wishes for a home and not a roving, triumphant, conquistador on the run, both the metaphors having been given to us by the West of course.

In the absence of any such continuity it would seem not only that we have difficulty in bequeathing but also in inheriting. This is probably because the grammar of future in its philosophical aspects seriously disturbs the realm of everyday desire and meaning. 'Will desire', 'will mean' – these phrases take us to the edge of a precipice where our everyday notions of 'humanity', 'mankind', 'man as a specie being' begin to blur and it seems that the creature of the future is after all a being with whom we have very little in common. Future seems like

vision a life beyond the grave. But in feeling this kind of helplessness we only become victims of the religious surrender or nearly so, not having the privilege to blame religion either.

If this and other forms of religious surrender, and on the other hand, scientific triumphism could be taken to constitute the hermeneutic horizon for future-concern, it may indeed be possible to move in the face of this tension towards a discourse where the mundane hermeneutic of desire and meaning that characterizes our everyday lives would suffice also for future concern. For this we need to have an abiding awareness of the horizons that we inhabit, that of flaccid but reverential religious surrender and the arrogant, but keen scientific triumphism. This is important if we must avoid looking at our progeny on the one extreme as captive slaves, depending on our mercy, or on the other as adversaries who in the final analysis steal a march over us quite simply because it is in the nature of things for us to die, which may mean no more than ignominy, a mere defeat for us.

It is in this live context that I have tried to open up the issue of bequeathing. One should be able to begin to reflect on its hermeneutic import before having to, for example, face the understandable and increasingly likely bewilderment of a young mother who asks the question – why should I ever have a child at all, which is not half as metaphysical a question as – why was I born – which refers to the depressing lack of necessity of any such thing. But are we ready to face such questioning from a young would be mother or father without getting down to a vaporous analysis of an illness, that we as philosophers, anthropologists and social scientists have happily preached – namely to ask questions, especially when they seem discomfiting.

(2) ADDRESSING THE FATHER

Shri Shauvande
Shri Lakshmi-Gopal Library,
Aurangabad,
Kashi.

Dear Father (whose feet I revere),

This is to submit that I am unable to appear before you in person in order to state the following. Thus this letter. Since you have forgiven me so many of my faults I can hope that this imprudent piece of writing will be forgiven as well.

After much thinking I have come to the conclusion that I have certain duties towards the country where I was born. This is the soil in which my ancestors lie and this is where my remains will dissolve after I go, whenever.

Right now our country is in danger and it seems sinful of me to sit passively. Supposing for a moment that our own house got attacked by robbers – if my own mother got surrounded by them, letting out a call for help – wouldn't it be right for

me to come to her aid even if it meant sure death? Or would one sit passively and watch!

A similar fate has struck our motherland which gave birth to us, which nourished us, which saw us grow, and into which I must merge some day. There is another mother too, that is in jeopardy. We do penances for even 'touching' a cow-eater but presently we are all living under their very rule! It destroys one's *Dharma* to live under the *Chandalas's* reign. Given the fact that besides everything else, my own *Dharma* is in danger, it is my duty to protect it even at the cost of my life.

If in the process I have to undergo pain I am willing to bear it. I agree that for this I needed your permission and should not have taken a step without receiving it as whatever you suggest would surely be for my own good. Kindly forgive me for making bold to say that what you suggested (earlier) is only out of love for me as your son. When *Dharma* is in danger I must surely go out to save it.

Lastly, I do not wish to give the impression that anything here is aimed to enlighten or educate you. On the one hand, I have only done my duty (by joining the freedom movement) and on the other, I feel deeply sad, as God alone can witness, to have disobeyed you. If there is anything that depresses me just now in the prison, it's the thought of my disobedience to you and mother.

I can only pray that you will forgive this the same way you have forgiven me in the past. If you could only send a word of forgiveness from you and 'Bua' to me in the prison, God alone knows, how happy I will feel. I was not unhappy to have landed in the prison anyway.

Yours son
Kamlapati

From: (*Sarika*, May 1989: 'File and Profile' by Rajkumar Gautam.

Passing on from the philosophical terror of having to face a young mother's questionings, the above letter would bring us the relief of a solid grounding of values. This once its not values that question our very existence; instead, we seem to stand to question their frozen deep-rootedness.

The above letter was written by our aged Congress leader Kamlapati Tripathi in his early youth. Addressed to his father, it brings out the complex web of reasoning and feelings that our fathers and forefathers went through while taking their alleged 'plunges' into the freedom struggle. The so-called plunge in Kamlapatiji's case seems to have been far from an unconstrained leap. It requires a mere modicum of textual perception to smell the guilt that pervades this epistolary atmosphere. It only shows the discovery on the part of a young man that unlike a regular son of a father, who must begin to think of the filial duties of life, he is faced with grand spectacular responsibilities and he barely has the courage to make a case out of the whole thing. As I admired the candid terseness of the Hindi text, which I may have failed to bring out here, I made two distinct observations to myself. First, the unappeasable but trivial suspicion that faced with his father in person, Kamlapatiji might just have been reduced to either a glum silence or rebellious incoherencies. That he was already imprisoned made a case ready for him. He was as if already done for. Second, his argument that the cow-eater must be banished from the country smacks of

bad faith. Kamlapati ji can be assumed to be aware that the freedom struggle involved not just rubbing shoulders with leaders and men from beef-eating backgrounds but also opened up the possibility of an independent but beef-eating India.

Both these observations are however saved by the bold authenticity of the youth's feeling, his genuine hurt at being ruled by a foreign ruler. This transparent authenticity of feeling seems almost like an exemplar in an age where we live a confused life in a jungle of ambiguous, multi-faceted values. This may get confirmed by a perception that Kamlapatiji's lie was directed as much towards his father as himself. Allowing the Brahmin youth from Benaras a minimal amount of self-respect, the poor chap merely wrote a letter of apology and surely not of submission or defeat. If he 'did not wish to give the impression that anything here (in the letter) is aimed to enlighten or educate' his parents, he also did declare his father's advice to be entirely out of place.

Kamlapatiji in brief, has two excuses to offer to his father in his letter. First, as an infant, whose past misdemeanours have been indulged before. To those who see the first excuse as a paltry psychological strategem, the second argument would make sense for its enormous philosophical claims. The young man claims that his behaviour is ruled by *Apad Dharma* and not *Dharma* in its routine sense.

The claim for *Apad Dharma* is indeed an extremely serious matter in the Indian tradition. For those unacquainted with this seriousness, of course, it might merely seem a rich storehouse of clever, caddish excuses for unethical conduct. What however seems amazing is that this *Apad Dharma*, this period of crisis never quite came to an end, as Kamlapatiji grew with the freedom struggle into a national leader in an independent India whose constitution went far beyond the embrace of Hinduism. This particular India did not simply refuse to relate to Kamlapatiji's variety of *Dharma* but in fact even reduced his reverence for the cow into a mere phrase in its Directive Principles. In brief a tradition lost its valued, loyal member to a never-ending crisis, an *Apad Dharma*.

One wishes that this awkward tale would end here and there would be no further embarrassment caused. On the other hand, I feel a deep-seated need to defend the authentic moment of a youth, that is so limpidly reflected in the above letter. What muddies this moment is a vast conspectus of a megastategy – the *Apad Dharma* argument taken to its utter extreme. At the end of it all it would seem that just as Kamlapatiji's later acceptance of the constitution of India was a mere matter of strategy, his bowing out, his departure from the Hindu tradition was also basically guided by strategic thinking (we again confront here the see-saw between religious surrender and scientific, strategic triumphism), though of course for the sake of an authentic sentiment.

It surely needs to be underscored that the rhetoric of the letter somewhat dissembles two major conceptual re-orientations which perhaps remained undeveloped. First, despite the gallantry of the mythified nationalistic phraseology, there is in it also the simple self-assertion of a hurt pride. Second, in spite of its

apologetic tenor, the letter is a highly ironic document, perhaps even a germinal challenge to the institution of patriarchy, to its very addressee.

The re-orientations quoted above are also indicative of what seems acceptable to me not simply in Kamlapatiji's letter but also essentially in all the biographies, stray reminiscences, nostalgic tit-bits that were part of my breeding till I confronted history as a large moribund mammoth that sits in our university libraries only to yawn endlessly at our effete academic efforts to bring it to life. To compensate perhaps for the unending intellectual *ennui*, this history also tried to impart to me the bliss of amnesia. There was of course another frighteningly wasteful history too, that taught to expend all one's energies in proving that Lord Rama bathed in the specific pool that he tautologically must have bathed in. One of course had the cretinous choice between the boredom of the aura and the aura of the boredom.

The two personages extensively quoted in this essay perhaps make two different kinds of shields, away from the boredom and the aura, providing us with propitious occasions to indulge in some serious questioning. Just as I brought in passages from John Stuart Mill with some amount of wariness, Kamlapatiji has also been quoted in order to warily question a massively more encrusted consensus. This consensus relates to the very specifically Indian predicament in which we are discussing the hermeneutic of bequeathing and can be summarized in terms of the three following assumptions commonly made in today's India:

(i) The dogma that there is a unique highway, or a given bridge between tradition and modern liberalism that ought to be single-mindedly traversed as the only conceptual, ideological progression available.

(ii) This conceptual journey involves either wholesale ingraining of our traditional concepts in the liberal hues or an equally large-scale jettisoning of most of the elements of our tradition.

(iii) The liberal democratic goal itself is a rigid, secure conceptual pedestal over which humanity must quickly clamber, while restraining all its utopic projections and daydreams.

Against all this Kamlapatiji and in fact the average Indian as such would seem to move in a somewhat random fashion. Kamlapatiji organizes a *patha* of *Durgasaptashati* soon after sermonizing to Mr Rajiv Gandhi over intra-party democracy! A few months later, the newspapers then give evidence that a traditional, archaic Panchayat comes ahead to defend democratic procedures in Haryana, while many intellectuals weigh the pros and cons till they cannot tell the difference between the principled and the expedient truth.

For these strange quixotic reasons too, I not only wish to inherit the authentic sentiments expressed in the letter but also to face the ethical, intellectual tensions that our forbears went through. Even as I condemn some of their acts and criticize others, I find it acceptable to receive from them even a low, modest threshold, a spring-board – if not a giant's shoulders – which every infant in his small pigmy days will necessarily dream of. As he further grows up he must decide too, if he wishes to leave behind a giant's shoulders or mere conceptual



